

BEREAVEMENT HELP



IMMEDIATE AND PRACTICAL HELP

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DEVASTATED BY LOSS

Nothing is really adequate to express the feeling of loss when someone close to us dies, but the word 'devastation' comes as close as any, and when we are devastated by loss, we feel that nobody really understands how we feel.

If anyone does know how you feel, then I do. My name is Dick Underwood, and I am a former Minister of Religion and a former Industrial Chaplain within the deep sea fishing industry. I am also a former Chief Executive of 'Counselling' a registration body for counselors in the UK.

As a minister of Religion I was regularly called upon to conduct family funerals, always visiting the family home several times before the funeral to provide comfort to the bereaved, and always continuing to visit afterwards for as long as my comfort and support was needed.

"The world just continues as though nothing happened."

As an industrial chaplain within the fishing industry I was frequently (more frequently than I liked) asked to break the news to relatives when a fisherman had been washed overboard, or when a ship had sunk with complete loss of life. I know the sense of disbelief and numbness that is so often the first emotion.

On one occasion a fisherman phoned his wife only a few minutes before I turned up at the family home to say that he had died. On returning to his ship from the phone box, the fisherman had fallen between his ship and the quay, being immediately crushed to death.

Although I sometimes conducted up to three funerals a day, I never became hardened to the suffering of others, and as I faced mourners during funeral services I frequently joined them in their tears as I shared in their loss.

Sometimes I had to find appropriate words not once, but three times for the same person, conducting a funeral service in church, a service at a crematorium, and then a later service during which the ashes would be scattered.

“I keep expecting him to walk
through the door.”

Frequently, in the case of bodies lost at sea, I was faced with conducting memorial services for relatives, some of which (because there was no body) were finding it almost impossible to believe their loved one had really died.

I have conducted funerals that have been attended by hundreds of mourners, but I have also conducted a funeral where I have been the only mourner.

DEATH IS THE LAST GREAT TABOO

One of the first problems for anyone who is bereaved is where you go for help.

Go to the largest book store you can find or the largest library in your neighborhood, and look for self-help books on bereavement. The chances are, you won't find any.

First of all, where would you look? The non-fiction area of a book store or library is usually divided into sections, but where would you find bereavement? The medical section – bereavement isn't an illness. The psychotherapy section – they are full of self-help books on all sorts of subjects – everything except bereavement. The religious section – not everyone is religious, but even if you are, you'll find little or nothing about bereavement.

There are books about every subject under the sun, except bereavement.

“Death is the great taboo.”

I know that everyone is different, and what helps one person cope, may have the opposite effect on the next person. There is no magic formula that will help everyone, but in this eBook I am sharing the knowledge gained by my experiences in the belief that it may bring help and comfort to those of you suffering from bereavement.

Bereavement counseling is not an exact science, but there will be something in this eBook for everyone.

BEREAVEMENT IS NORMAL

The first thing that I want to tell you is that what you are feeling is normal.

The feelings we have when we lose someone we love, all come under the general heading of 'Bereavement'. The feelings change, and become less intense over time, but make no mistake, in one form or another; they can last for years, even a lifetime.

Bereavement affects every part of our being, emotionally, physically, mentally, socially, and spiritually; but the overriding initial feeling is one of intense pain, or grief.

This eBook cannot remove the grief, but I know from experience that following the advice in this eBook will help ease the intensity of the pain.

"This eBook should help
ease the pain of
bereavement".

DEATH IS A FACT OF LIFE

A century or so ago, and in many third world countries still, death was a familiar and frequent visitor. Families were large, children shared bedrooms, and many of the illnesses that we now receive immunization for were killers.

By the time a child had grown to adulthood they may have experienced the death of a close family member several times: a sibling sleeping in the same room, a parent, and two, three, or four grandparents.

These days, death is a less frequent visitor, and it's not unusual for someone to reach middle age, or even older, before death claims the life of someone close to them. This is, of course, a more desirable state of affairs, but it does bring one major disadvantage.

There is no longer any familiarity with death, no longer any familiarity with bereavement, and no longer any familiarity with how it feels or how to cope with those feelings.

ALL GRIEF IS DIFFERENT

There's no right or wrong way to grieve. We all have different personalities, different ways of coping and different past experiences. It follows that no two people's grief will be exactly the same. Each of us is likely to experience a wide range of feelings, which may vary from day to day.

Having said that. All the following symptoms are normal symptoms of grief. It's just that, because we don't suffer from grief very often, we fail to recognize that these symptoms are normal, and to be expected.

Physical symptoms may include: hollowness in the stomach, oversensitivity to noise, tightness in the chest or throat, weakness in muscles, lack of energy, a dry mouth, fatigue and breathlessness.

Emotional feelings may include: sadness, anger, guilt, self-reproach, anxiety, loneliness, helplessness, hopelessness, shock, emancipation, relief, numbness and yearning for the dead person.

Behavioral changes may include: insomnia and sleep interruption, appetite disturbances, absent-minded behavior, social withdrawal, dreams of the deceased, avoiding reminders of the deceased, sighing, restless over activity, crying, visiting places or treasuring objects that are reminders of the lost loved one.

Thoughts may include: disbelief, confusion, preoccupation with the deceased, a sense of presence of the deceased, auditory and visual hallucinations.

AFTER THE FUNERAL

The first week or so after a death is a busy time: telling others, registering the death and making funeral arrangements. The full reality of the death may not hit you until after this time, when friends and family may have moved away and the real pain of grief begins.

After the initial impact, you may find that you're up one minute and down the next. This is normal.

Confusion, disorganization, anger and guilt are common feelings that may fluctuate over the coming months, giving way to apathy, sadness and depression as time goes on.

One of the hardest things of all, is the realization that the rest of the world just carries on as though nothing has happened. Other people don't see, never mind share, your pain.

WHAT YOU FEEL IS NORMAL

Do you feel an intense and overriding sadness, bordering upon clinical depression? That's normal.

Do you feel angry that you've been left alone? That's normal.

Do you feel guilty? That's normal.

Do you feel someone must be to blame, even if in your heart of hearts you know the death could not have been prevented? That's normal.

Do you feel helpless? That's normal.

Do you feel hopeless, with no hope for your future? That's normal.

Do you feel a sense of shock, a feeling that what has happened couldn't have happened? That's normal.

Do you feel numb? That's normal.

Do you yearn for the person you love to walk through the door? That's normal.

Do you burst into tears for no apparent reason? That's normal.

"You are not going mad.
What you feel is normal for
anyone who is bereaved."

LOVE BRINGS PAIN

If you love someone, you are bound to feel pain at their death.

To be honest, you wouldn't want it any other way.

The greater your love, the greater your pain.

SYMPTOMS OF BEREAVEMENT

So there is no consolation for someone who is newly bereaved.

There is nothing that I could say that will lessen the shock, the sense of isolation, the sense of unbelief, and the sense of utter and total grief. There is a time when there is nothing to do except to share the pain and share the tears.

It is normal for a bereaved person to think about the person who has died, to the exclusion of everything else.

Someone speaks to you, but you have no real idea what they are saying and their words are just background noise. You barely see them. What you are really seeing is the person who has died.

You can see them, you can hear them, you can smell them, you taste their lips on yours, and you can reach out and almost touch them.

Those thoughts are all intruding, to the exclusion of everything else that may be going on around you. They are more important than eating or drinking, and more important than your own life or health. They are all consuming; twenty-four hours a day.

All this is normal.

SO WHAT IS ABNORMAL BEREAVEMENT?

All the above things, and more, are the natural immediate reaction to the death of someone you love.

But sooner or later you do need to eat, drink and sleep, you do need to make the thousand and one decisions that we all make every day.

The timing will differ from person to person, but sooner or later, we all need to move on.

That's not to say that we forget about the person who has died.

The sense of loss may always remain, but eventually we find time to think about other things as well.

It is not normal to continue for years thinking about your loved one twenty-four hours a day to the exclusion of everyone and everything else.

SO HOW DO I MOVE ON?

Of course, it's easy for me to say, "sooner or later, we all need to move on", but it's easier said than done.

In this section I want to suggest different ways in which you can help yourself.

If you feel the time is right for you to move on, but you are having difficulty doing so, I hope you will find at least some (if not all) of the following suggestions helpful to you.

Still unable to sleep?

Still lying awake all hours of the night thinking about your loved one? Still, lethargic all day due to the lack of a good night's sleep? Are you feeling completely exhausted through not having slept properly for months?

Drugs are not the answer. They may work short term, but gradually the body adapts to them and they lose their effect.

I have counseled many people who have been unable to sleep, and I have found the following exercise has helped almost all of them.

Firstly; stay awake.

You may think this is a strange place to start, but physically and medically sleep (and dreaming) is a necessity.

Your body will sleep. If not at night, then you will start 'day dreaming' or 'hallucinating', or feeling 'half asleep' during the day. If you have not been sleeping at night, your body will have been snatching a moment or two of sleep several times a day without you being aware of it. So by the time you get to your bedtime your body doesn't know how to react.

So stay awake.

Don't relax during the day. If you feel yourself daydreaming then stand up, walk about.

Do something. Anything. But do not relax

And when it comes to the time you normally go to bed – don't.

Listen to the radio, watch the television, or watch a DVD, and if you feel yourself getting tired, make yourself a strong coffee.

The worst time is between three and five in the morning. If it's safe to do so, go for a walk outside, in your garden or round the block. If it's not safe, walk through your home.

Do whatever you like, but stay awake. The following day it's the same procedure, just stay awake.

The next night ... That's when you sleep.

By that time you've been wide-awake for thirty-six hours (and that's assuming you slept the night before, which you didn't, so it's actually longer than that). If you've been wide-awake for over thirty-six hours, you will sleep. You may not sleep all night, or even half the night, but you will sleep.

Once you wake up. Get up, even if it's the middle of the night and you have only slept for three or four hours.

Then stay up, and stay wide awake all day, until bedtime the following night.

You will sleep longer the next time, and gradually you will retrain your body that night is for sleeping, and day is for staying wide-awake. This may not happen overnight (excuse the pun) but for most people it will happen surprisingly quickly.

Constantly thinking about your loved one?

Be honest. You never thought about them every second of every day when they were alive. You loved them all right. You missed them when they were not around. But every second of every day? I don't think so.

If you didn't do that when they were alive. It's got to be unnatural to do it when they are dead, but how do you stop.

There is no magic formula, but again, the following technique has been found to help thousands of people who have found themselves in the same situation as you.

Start by choosing a time to remember! Next, be selective. Choose what you are going to think about. It's your mind. They are your memories. Set time to remember, and remember all the good things about the person you have loved.

- What was the funniest thing they ever said to you?
- What was the funniest thing you ever said to them. The thing that you both laughed about?
- What was the funniest thing they ever did?
- What's the nicest present they ever bought you?
- Think about the day you first met, or your first real date.
- What made you fall in love with them?
- What's the strangest thing they ever did?
- What's the strangest, or funniest, thing you did together?
- Look through your holiday photos, or your wedding photo's, or family photo's, and re-live the occasions they remind you of.

Set aside time to think about all the above things. The length of time doesn't particularly matter. Half an hour. An hour. A couple of hours. The important thing is to have a set time.

At the end of that time, just say to yourself, "Sorry, but I've got to do something else now. I'll be back the same time tomorrow to think about you, but just for now I've got to do something else. Your time is tomorrow".

Again, it's easier said than done, but eventually it does work.

Choose a set time. Look forward to it. Anticipate it. Enjoy it when it comes.

But at the end of your chosen time, do something else. Look forward to the next time, but next time is not now, it's then.

Your mind in a whirl?

Is your mind in a whirl? All sorts of things swimming round your mind, and everything mixed up? This isn't uncommon, especially at night, but what can you do about it?

Two things that you can do is to speak your thoughts out-loud, or write your thought down.

When you write your thoughts, or speak them out loud (even to yourself), you have to put your thoughts into a logical order. It's harder than you think to speak rubbish, or to write in anything other than complete sentences.

You speak, you write, and a remarkable thing starts to happen. As your words take on a logical order, so your thoughts also take on a logic of their own. The very act of writing or speaking your thoughts helps sort your mind out.

Re-living the death?

I have met many people whose bereavement has been made worse, or prolonged, because they have become obsessed by the manner of their loved ones death.

They continually think, for example when someone has died of cancer, of their emaciated or pain wracked bodies. In a sense, it is natural to remember the last image you had of someone you love, but it is important to get things into perspective.

When you remember the person you love, it is important to remember the whole person.

If you've known then for forty years, then remember the forty years not just the last few months, weeks, days or even hours.

Their life was a lifetime; their death was usually just the briefest of intervals.

Follow the advice given above, and re-live their whole life, not just the act of its ending.

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- What was the funniest thing you ever said to them. The thing that you both laughed about?
- What was the funniest thing they ever did?
- What's the nicest present they ever bought you?
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- What's the strangest thing they ever did?
- What's the strangest, or funniest, thing you did together?
- Look through your holiday photos, or your wedding photo's, or family photo's, and re-live the occasions they remind you of.

Depressed?

Again, depression is natural. It's nothing to be ashamed at. It is simply a natural reaction to losing the person who has meant the most to you.

But it is almost impossible to be depressed whilst you are laughing. So remember the funny times.

People are strange (you wouldn't want everyone to be 'normal' would you). We've all got our funny idiosyncrasies, our strange and funny ways, the things that make us laugh at ourselves and for those we love to laugh with us.

I've repeated this advice twice already, but I'm going to repeat it here because experience has taught me it is the most liberating thing that you can do. If you take nothing else from this eBook, take this. Remember the times you've laughed with the person you love.

- What was the funniest thing they ever said to you?
- What was the funniest thing you ever said to them. The thing that you both laughed about?
- What was the funniest thing they ever did?
- What's the nicest present they ever bought you?
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- What made you fall in love with them?
- What's the strangest thing they ever did?
- What's the strangest, or funniest, thing you did together?
- Look through your holiday photos, or your wedding photo's, or family photo's, and re-live the occasions they remind you of.

Angry?

It's natural to be angry. What has happened to you is such an 'unfair' thing to have happened that you feel someone must be to blame.

It's not uncommon for that anger to be directed at those who had nothing directly to do with events, relatives, neighbors, or friends. Sometimes, though, anger may be directed at those you feel are directly responsible for what has happened; a nurse, a doctor, a driver, a burglar, an employer.

What is important is that this anger doesn't turn to hate, and for hate to become the all-consuming legacy of your bereavement. I have known people whose anger and hatred have become all consuming. It has affected their life, and attitude to life, for years, and they have become bitter people unable to move on.

Whatever your religious belief, there is no doubt that whilst hate destroys, love heals.

It is important that your love and compassion is stronger than your anger and hatred. Get the balance wrong, and it prolongs and increases your pain. Get the balance right, and the intensity of the pain gradually diminishes.

Guilty?

It is natural to want to blame someone for a tragic death. So when nobody else fits the bill, it's natural to blame yourself.

Sometimes people feel guilty because they never said goodbye to their loved one, or never kissed them goodbye that morning, or because their last words were harsh or critical, or they feel that if they had done or said something different, then the death wouldn't have occurred.

Sometimes people feel guilty just for being alive.

Again, it's easy for me to say, but hard for you to put into practice, but you are not to blame. You are not responsible.

You could, of course, repeatedly think about the fact that you never said goodbye, never gave that last kiss, or that you spoke those last harsh words. Those were fleeting things. It is important that you get things in perspective, and concentrate your thoughts on the times you did say, "I love you", and the many times you shared a tender moment, and not on any momentary lack of affection.

Can't accept the death?

This is far more common than most people suppose. Especially if there is no physical place of remembrance, or if the place of remembrance is far away.

When I worked as an industrial chaplain within the deep-sea fishing industry, I was frequently called upon to break the news of a death when a fisherman had died at sea. When there is a funeral, there is often a defining moment when the reality of the death hits the person who is bereaved. That moment may come when they view the body, or during the funeral service, especially during the actual

act of committal. But when there is no body to view, or no funeral to attend, that defining moment sometimes never happens. The reality of the death somehow never sinks in.

Accepting the death is, of course, a precursor to moving on.

Increasingly, even if there is a funeral, it may be too far, or inappropriate, to attend it. Someone may die in another state, another country, or even another continent. Even within the same country, or same town, you yourself may be too ill to travel.

All these things can prevent you coming to terms with the reality of the death.

Seeing the dead person?

It's not unusual for people who have lost a partner to clearly see or hear, or smell, the person about the house, and sometimes even converse with them at length. These visual and auditory hallucinations are part of the normal grief reaction and a very real physical occurrence to those who experience them.

Grief affects every part of you being, every emotion and every one of your senses, so it's not surprising that this also includes your sense of sight, hearing and smell. It's not surprising, it's not unusual, and it doesn't mean you are going mad.

OTHER WAYS OF HELPING YOURSELF

Be gentle with yourself. It's vital that you don't expect too much from yourself. Give yourself permission to be disorganized for a while. Forgive yourself when you make mistakes.

Care for yourself physically. Lack of sleep and nourishment may mean that you're more prone to infections and illness, so eating little and often and getting sufficient rest are both important.

Take exercise. If possible do some form of exercise, even if it's only a gentle walk.

Avoid alcohol. Reliance on alcohol may help temporarily to dull the pain, but in the long run it doesn't help and may become addictive.

Avoid sleep medication. It's not advisable to rely on sleeping pills for any length of time. In the first few days, they may help you to get to sleep but your body and mind need to adjust naturally to bereavement and sleeping pills may inhibit this process. They can also become addictive.

Be kind to yourself. Try to do one thing extra for yourself each week, such as buying yourself a bunch of flowers or going to the cinema.

Deal with your feelings. Write down all the feelings that are in your head, especially before going to bed, as this may help you to sleep better. Sharing the pain with other members of the family can be helpful, but remember they too may have their own pain. A good friend who's not so emotionally involved may also be prepared to listen.

Work on your self-esteem. Your self-esteem may have taken a real knock. To help morale, buy a notebook to record your daily 'successes'. Write at least five successes each day. Acknowledge

yourself each time you achieve something, however small.

Recall happy memories. Remembering the good times you had with the person who died can be painful but healing. Looking at photographs or making a memory book and keeping meaningful tributes may help.

Don't rush to dispose of clothing. Rushing to get rid of your loved one's clothes and possessions, even if you're persuaded by friends to do this, isn't necessarily useful. It's best to do it when you feel ready. You may want to keep an old jersey which still reminds you of your loved one's special smell. This is normal. It's also worth remembering that others may value a keepsake.

Take things slowly. Making big changes such as moving house, starting a new relationship or changing your job should be delayed for at least six months. You've suffered a huge loss, and need to adjust to that change in your life first.

HOW LONG DOES GRIEF LAST?

Unfortunately, there's no definitive answer because each of us is different.

Recovery may take months, a few years or even longer.

Your friends may think that you 'should' have got over the death after six months or twelve months, but this is usually an unrealistic expectation.

A severe physical wound takes time to heal, and leaves a deep physical scar that reminds you of past pain. The severe emotional wound of bereavement also takes time to heal, and also leaves an emotional scar.

However, by following some of the ideas in this booklet, our hope is that some of the more acute pain you feel in the beginning will lessen and life will gradually seem less bleak and meaningless.

THINGS THAT MAKE BEREAVEMENT WORSE

Some of you are going to say, “How can it be any worse”?

By 'worse' I don't mean that the symptoms of bereavement are worse. What I mean is, that some things can needlessly prolong the length of time you may suffer from the most acute stage of bereavement that affects everyone. We've covered many of them within this eBook.

- refusal to accept the loss
- lack of practical, emotional or spiritual support
- marital or family discord
- mixed feelings towards the lost person
- difficulties in expressing feelings
- exaggerated self-control
- low self-esteem
- inability to attend the funeral
- anxiety about money
- regret over unfinished business
- continuing grief over a past bereavement
- the lack of a body to mourn

REMEMBERING ANNIVERSARIES

Everyone is different, and some people prefer to mark an anniversary quietly.

For others, though, remembering anniversaries can be an important event in their grieving process, particularly the first anniversary.

You may find it helpful to make an occasion of the day by going to a place you enjoyed together, going to the grave and having a quiet time of reflection, listening to music that you and your loved one enjoyed, or lighting a candle for the person who died.

Why not ask people who knew the person to a meal, suggesting they each bring a funny memory of the person you have loved?

MOVING ON

Take time to understand your reactions.

Look within yourself to figure out what you need to do to cope and take care of yourself, both mentally and physically.

If you have experienced other losses or stressful events in your life, your reactions may become even more complex.

Just as you heal physically from major physical injuries, you can heal from emotional wounds.

Your reactions mean you are grieving changes and learning to cope with loss.

It is normal to experience these reactions, and part of what can help is taking the time to look at what you need to do to best adjust.